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Some Light Breaks Through — But Not Enough

A controversial book about the Central Intelligence Agency has gone to press with several blank spaces, marking the passages that the CIA has managed at least temporarily to delete.

With the help of our own CIA sources, we have now filled in the blanks. The deletions, all fascinating, some explosive, are more likely to make people blush than to bring down governments.

The CIA, nevertheless, is still fighting in the courts to keep the embarrassing revelations out of the forthcoming book, "The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence," by Victor Marchetti and John Marks.

Marchetti is a bespectacled former intelligence analyst who has been forbidden by the CIA to mention that he played a crucial role in the celebrated Cuban missile crisis.

The Cuba-bound Soviet missiles, too large to stow below decks, were disguised in crates on deck. U.S. reconnaissance planes brought back photographs, which Marchetti examined. Through tedious, microscopic study, say our sources, he was able to distinguish between tractor crates and missile crates.

The passages that the CIA is still contesting in the courts — with a few exceptions which we voluntarily will omit — might mortify the CIA but couldn't possibly endanger the national security. The censored incidents make the CIA look like a covert circus, with the cloak-and-dagger crowd getting involved in some unbelievable situations, sometimes hilarious, sometimes grim.

One episode that has been deleted from the book, for example, concerns a Soviet spy in Japan who was about to defect to the United States. The prospect exhilarated the head of the CIA's Soviet desk who caught the first jet for Tokyo to get in on the action.

But the Russians became suspicious of their comrade and tailed him to the trysting spot. At the dramatic moment of defection, the prospective turncoat found himself literally caught in a tug-of-war, with the Americans pulling on one arm and the Russians clinging to the other. In the middle of the struggle, the Japanese gendarmes intruded upon the unlikely scene and carted the whole group off to the pokey for disturbing the peace.

This doesn't compare to the high drama in the Himalayas, however, when the United States needed information on the Chinese nuclear tests in remote Sinkiang province. The CIA recruited a mountain climbing crew and trained them for weeks in the Colorado mountains. Then in the late 1960s, the CIA climbers were dispatched to scale one of the loftiest peaks in the Himalayas to install a nuclear-powered listening device aimed at the Chinese test sites.

The climb was so hazardous that a couple packers fell to their deaths. But the device, at last, was triumphantly implanted. Unhappily, the first mountain blizzard swept the listening device over. When spring came, the melting mountain snow was polluted with radiation, which seeped into the watershed. The abashed CIA had to send another mountain-climbing team up the peak to find the wreckage and remove it.

The Marchetti-Marks manuscript also contains some big names, among them that of West Germany's Chancellor Willy Brandt. Like many other world leaders, he received money from the CIA when he was an aspiring young politician.

At a White House state dinner for Brandt in 1971, the high and mighty were puzzled about one nondescript guest whom no one recognized.

The manuscript originally identified the mystery man as Brandt's old CIA contact, whom the chancellor had asked the White House to invite for sentimental reasons. The CIA got this reference censored out of the book, ostensibly to spare Brandt's sensibilities.

The manuscript also tells of a 1967 trip that President Lyndon Johnson took to Punta del Este, Uruguay, for a meeting of the Organization of American States. In his expansive Texas style, LBJ dispensed gifts and souvenirs, wined and dined dignitaries and put on a lavish performance. To his embarrassment, he considerably exceeded the budget allowed for the trip by the State Department.

Because of economies LBJ himself had imposed, the State Department simply was unable to cover the tab. So the President was obliged to turn to the CIA, which paid the bill out of a secret slush fund called "The Directors Contingency Fund."

This fund had to be tapped in 1967, too, by Defense Secretary Robert McNamara whose Pentagon budget couldn't meet a verbal commitment he had made to a European ally for arms aid. The funds were secretly transferred from the CIA to the Defense Department without the knowledge of Congress.

The CIA also used money from the secret fund to invest in stocks, which presumably were plowed back into CIA retirement, escrow and credit union funds. The revelation that the CIA was playing the stock market, our sources report, was cut out of the Marchetti-Marks book.

However humorous some of the CIA's escapades may have been, the authors are deadly serious about the issues their book raises. For the American people have only the haziest of views into the shadowy, subterranean world of espionage.

Now and then, a light breaks through the murky darkness. It may shine briefly on a love nest, the confession of a refugee, a softening of will or skill. But at best, the public catches only an occasional, fleeting glimpse into the CIA's dramatic and deadly operations. A little more light is needed.

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